Size Does Matter

By Ltjg. Erin Wreski

One thing I've learned in my short naval-aviation career is that asking questions, even if you think they are dumb, may save your life. I was fortunate to join my squadron in the early stages of our work-up cycle and ease my way from the FRS training syllabus into the tactical world of the fleet. I was comfortable in the Prowler, and long flights never seemed to phase me. That "comfort zone" changed on my first flight in a dry suit, during our operations over the Gulf of Alaska.

Throughout flight training, we always had been introduced to new equipment and had trained extensively in its use. This high level of training was the norm from the moment I was introduced to the world of naval aviation. I hit my first true hurdle, though, when I was introduced to the dry suit; I had a serious lack of knowledge, and I didn't ask the right questions.

At the FRS, the PRs ordered us all kinds of gear we would need in the fleet. We didn't need a lot of this gear right away, so it would be thrown in the back of the closet and forgotten. When I arrived at my new squadron, fresh-faced and ready to go, I handed over all my gear and let the PRs do their magic. A few months later, they called me down to the shop and asked me to try on a dry suit; I happily obliged. I took the dry suit to the female head and struggled into it. I'm an active warm-water scuba diver, so I'm used to skin suits and lightweight wetsuits. I assumed the dry suit would work the same way: It would be a bit snug. I tried it on, walked back to the PR shop, and had them look at it. They said it looked OK and asked me how it felt. Instead of asking how it should feel, I said, "It fits fine." I then took it off and didn't give it another thought.

Fast-forward to Operation Northern Edge 2004 and my first flight as part of a large-scale operation. The water temperature in the Gulf of Alaska was a chilly 40 degrees Fahrenheit, and word was passed down we had to wear dry suits for all flights. I had heard all the jokes about the dry suits. Aircrew always were complaining about how uncomfortable they were and how the rubber around the neck pulled at your skin. I had prepared myself to be somewhat uncomfortable in the jet, wearing the dry suit, but I was unprepared for how much of a hindrance it actually became.

Dressing in an ill-fitting drysuit is a challenge.

I put on the dry suit over a T-shirt and pair of shorts; I could not imagine wearing anything thicker underneath. Meanwhile, I watched all the other aircrew climb into theirs, wearing thermals. This observation should have been my first clue something was wrong. After putting on the rest of my gear (for the first time), I realized how ill-fitted my dry suit really was, and we still had more than an hour before launch. Again, I should have said something about my sudden loss in range of motion, but, like most aviators, I figured I would try to tough it out.

Once up on deck, I ran into more problems. Climbing into the

Because of the tight fit of her drysuit, this was the limit of vertical leg movement.

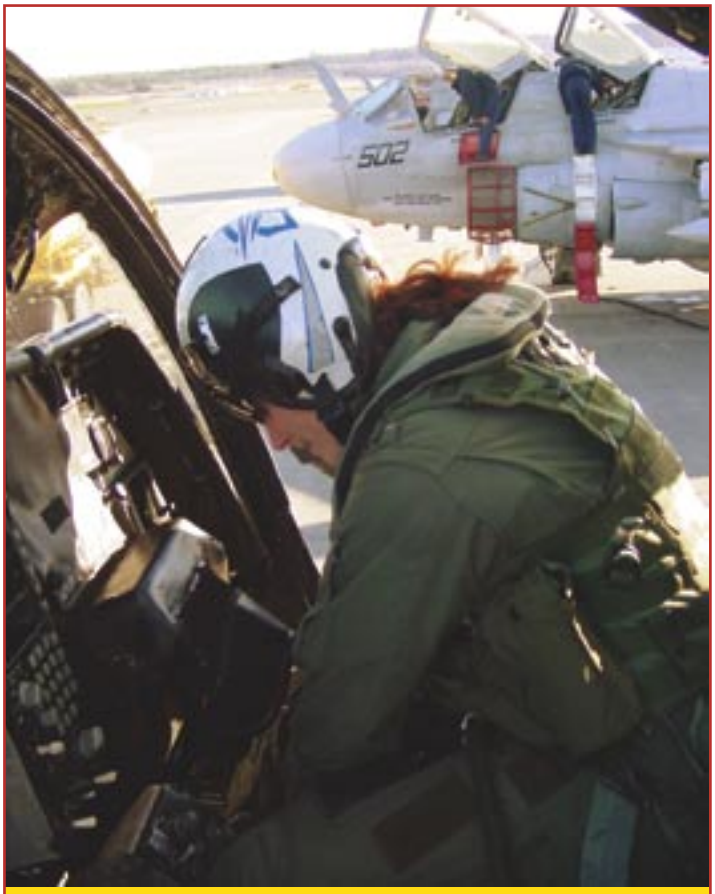
jet became almost impossible because the dry suit was even tighter with the added resistance of the G-suit and harness. I did not have the freedom of movement necessary to bend my knees and climb the boarding ladder. I struggled all the way to the top and into the jet.

Once in, I couldn't reach vital circuit breakers without having to unstrap. I realized I would have to put my life at risk, as well as the other three aircrew, if I had to pull circuit breakers. Later in our flight, I started to lose feeling in my toes. Circulation in my feet was cut off because the dry-suit booties were too small. All of these issues started to add up, and my focus was taken away from my flight and the immediate tasks of our mission. Instead, my attention shifted to my excessive discomfort. Once back on deck, I again had to struggle out of the jet; the loss of feeling in my feet did not help.

Upon my return to the PR shop, I knew everyone else had been uncomfortable, so I didn't make a big deal about my situation. A few flights later, I had had enough and talked to the PRs about it. They were concerned, but they couldn't do much. This far into deployment, there weren't any replacements or a way to alter my suit for a better fit. Only after I began asking around the squadron did I find others who also lacked a good range of motion and the reach required to operate certain equipment. Suddenly, I found I was not alone. Others silently were battling their issues with ill-fitted dry suits.

I always have had to face obstacles because, at 5 feet 3 inches, I'm smaller than the average aviator. One obstacle is my inability to reach the handle to lower the hook in some of our fleet aircraft. Being in the EA-6B, with two aircrew in the front, my reach has not been a significant problem as long as I brief that, in any extremis situation, such as lost brakes on the boat, my pilot might have to get the hook. As with most of the difficulties my smaller stature has generated, there have been easy fixes. One lesson learned here is if you are unsure, ask questions. The issue with the dry suit easily could have been fixed had I spoken up and asked questions early into the fitting process.

A proper fit would have fixed my comfort level in the plane and possibly extended my survival time in the water (by being able to wear thermals and a liner, for which the dry suit was designed). However, it would not have fixed the mobility issues associated with wearing a dry suit. If the dry suit creates mobility issues on land and in the cockpit, I imagine that, after the chaos of an emergency and a violent ejection, the last thing you would need to deal with upon hitting the water is an inability to maneuver while fighting for survival. A second lesson is a lesson relearned: When receiving new gear, take it out, try it on, and use it. Find out its limitations, and yours, before you need it for survival.



Forward movement is limited in an ill-fitting drysuit.

Ltjg. Wreski flies with VAQ-139.